

The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
J. H. OLDHAM

July 28th, 1943

DEAR MEMBER,

I am not at all surprised that the publication in our last issue of the letter from Mr. Curtis and the brevity of my provisional comment on it should have perplexed some of our members. The doubt has also been expressed whether the Christian News-Letter was the place in which to raise these issues. Will those who have written accept my grateful thanks. The letters are too numerous for me to send individual replies, but all have been carefully read. The correspondence shows, as I anticipated, the widest diversity of view; I do not mean diversity on a straight issue, though that is no doubt included, but diversity about what the issues are. I will try to disentangle some of them.

CHRISTIANITY AND POLITICS

We have not up to the present regarded it as our function to engage in theological debate. Our aim has been to offer a commentary on contemporary events in the light of the Christian faith. But the comment can only be woolly and confusing unless it is made from a definite and acknowledged standpoint, and it has no doubt been evident to discerning readers that our standpoint is the understanding of Christianity expressed in the historic Christian creeds. That is where we stand, and we do not propose to change our position.

No one can attempt the task we have set ourselves, however, without being made aware at every turn of the huge hiatus between the world view implied in the Christian faith and the assumptions of modern thought and action. There are Christians who are also modern in their ways of thinking and feeling, but it would be hard to find one in whose understanding of the world the synthesis of faith and modernity has been fully achieved. It has been one of our chief aims through the common study of the contemporary situation to establish communication between those who share the position of the Christian News-Letter and those who do not, so that they can really talk to one another. The Supplement on the political philosophy of Mr. Curtis has started a conversation which we want to pursue further.

The theological issues raised in the letter of Mr. Curtis are not new. The remark of Lessing which has had so decisive an influence on his thinking has been a principal battlefield of the great debate in which for the last two hundred years Christian theology has struggled to lay its account with modern thought and knowledge.

If it had been merely a matter of an individual echo of this long-standing debate, I should not have regarded it as coming within the

province of the Christian News-Letter. It is the context in which the issue was brought to our attention that seemed to me significant. It is true that innumerable individuals have wrestled with these questions in the endeavour to find a personal faith, and that they have been for long debated in the theological and philosophical faculties in the universities of Europe. But they are seen in a fresh light when they force their way, as they do in the writings of Mr. Curtis, into the political conflict about the foundations of the State, which has culminated in battles costing millions of human lives. It has been the fashion for a long time to treat religious belief as a private affair; it is increasingly evident that man's ultimate beliefs work themselves out in the long run in action and suffering on the vastest scale.

Leaving for the moment the question of the nature of Christian belief, let us take our stand in the political arena in which men are contending to-day at the price of blood for their future political existence. I take it that every one will agree that there *is* a political order, distinct from the sphere of the Church, though the extent to which some people allow the two to become confused in their thinking is almost unbelievable.

What Christians must desire of the political order is not that it should become the Church, but, first, that it should allow and assist men to develop in accordance with the law of their nature implanted by God and thereby realize the true ends of both their temporal and their eternal existence; and, secondly, that in the largest degree possible the political order should be (in M. Maritain's phrase) "vivified and impregnated" with the truths of the Christian revelation. From both these standpoints the political philosophy of Mr. Curtis is of the highest importance as an uncompromising challenge to powerful forces which in the present period of history threaten the dignity and freedom of man. If these are destroyed there is no longer any *person* to whom Christianity can make its appeal. Thus in the conflicts of to-day about the nature of political society vital Christian interests are involved; the political battle is also a religious battle.

In sharp opposition to the unqualified atheism of Marxism, the Axis deification of the nation and State, and the secularized liberalism which has prepared the ground for these, Mr. Curtis is convinced that there is no foundation for a political structure in which mankind can live together in peace except the acknowledgement of the infinite obligation which men owe to one another because of the infinite obligation which they owe to God. To realize the strength of conviction and fervour with which he holds this faith one has to steep oneself in what he has written. The Commonwealth which he envisages is one in which the guiding principles of public life would be derived from, and be in accord with, the Christian understanding of the nature and end of man. When we take a broad view of the contemporary situation as a whole, the importance of that fact can hardly be exaggerated.

But now, Mr. Curtis asks us in effect, is not that enough? Is there more to Christianity than the great truths exemplified in the teaching and life of Jesus Christ—belief in a personal God, in the inexorable demands of the moral law, in the moral perfecting of man

as the end of life, in the infinite duty which men owe to God and to one another, in the life after death? If we were to regard *this* as essential Christianity, should we not lift heavy burdens from men's minds and souls, win back to religion many in the younger generation who are turning away from it, and enlist their aid in establishing the city of God on earth?

The force of a question derives in no small part from the quarter from which it comes. The question is addressed to us by a political thinker who has devoted a life-time to enquiry into the foundations of the British Commonwealth and has also taken an active share in its practical affairs. And behind Mr. Curtis, putting the same question, are the present fratricidal conflicts of mankind. That is why the question needs to be taken very seriously. What answer has the Church to these urgent demands of life?

Both in the early centuries and throughout modern times two ways of understanding Christianity have been in conflict. In the one view its essential meaning is to be found in the teachings of Christ, in the other in His Person, and in His birth, death and resurrection as events having a cosmic significance.

I will not attempt in this Letter to expound or defend the second of these positions. What contribution can be made to the understanding of it within the limits of the Christian News-Letter will need careful consideration. We have no intention of changing the character of the News-Letter and turning it into a journal of theological discussion. Only a small proportion of our space can be devoted to the further consideration of the present subject, vast as is its importance—at the best only a few Supplements that bear on it in the course of a year. Apart from this we may be able in the future to sharpen our comment on current events by a clearer recognition, explicit or implicit, of the difference between the two views.

If we are to consider these questions we have to begin by viewing them in their true proportions. It is worth noting that what we may call for the sake of brevity the traditional view has through the centuries, in spite of unceasing attack by many of the ablest minds in succeeding generations, shown an extraordinary persistence and power of survival.

Although Lessing held that the contingent events of history can never prove the eternal verities, it was, as a matter of historical fact, precisely the culmination of the particular events of history in a unique, Divine, "super-historic" event that was felt in the early centuries to be the revelation of a deeper truth than the wisdom of the ancient world could supply, and that gained, and has held, the imagination of mankind. Many influences contributed to the triumph of Christianity over the paganism of the Graeco-Roman world, but fundamentally it was due to the fact that it was seen to provide a more satisfying answer to the riddles of life than classical culture could give.¹

Similarly in our own day many minds that are entirely free in their search for truth have found in the traditional interpretation of

¹ The story has been told in masterly fashion in C. N. Cochrane's *Christianity and Classical Culture* (Oxford University Press, 30s.). Reference has already been made more than once in the Christian News-Letter to this important volume.

Christian doctrine a profounder insight into the meaning of life and a more adequate answer to its real problems than is furnished by the other view. No view of the ultimate meaning of life is free from intellectual difficulties; but there are sincere and fearless thinkers for whom the attempt to get rid of the "scandal of historical particularity," i.e. of the connection between the eternal verities and particular events of history, is no simplification of the riddle of existence, but leaves us with a position much more vulnerable than the other to the assaults of the critical intellect.

That, however, is no more than an indication of questions that must be taken up later. It will also appear in the further consideration of the matter that the difference in the interpretation of Christianity will lead, in spite of much common ground, to important qualifications of the *political* philosophy expounded in Mr. Curtis's writings.

IS THERE A "PLAIN QUESTION"?

Before leaving the question at this point for the time being to return to it later, I must, in order not to seem to be running away from anything, refer to the charge that I have failed to answer Mr. Curtis's "plain question." If he wants to know whether I believe in the resurrection of Christ, the answer is "Yes." If I were to attempt to answer adequately the further question of what the belief includes, or does not include, and how it is related to the total Christian view, I should need to write a book; and unless I devoted to it years of thought and study, and even if I did, it would contain many things with which many other Christians would not agree.

Moreover, the question of Mr. Curtis, so far from being plain, appears to me in the way it is framed to be based on certain pre-suppositions which must be kept for later discussion, but which I should certainly want to challenge. An answer which makes sense on my assumptions may quite well seem nonsense on his.

THE SUPPLEMENT

By this time you will be ready for something more in the way of news. The writer of this week's Supplement, describing an experiment which has far-reaching implications, is a member of the Iona Community, by whom he was assigned to this task.

Yours sincerely,

D. H. Deacon

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MASKS AND MEN

By IAN M. FRASER

We clergymen are strange, distant people to laymen. We get on very well together—but we are foreigners. We smile at one another across No-Man's-Land with quizzical would-be-friendly smiles. But the background, the ideas, the very language of each is but dimly comprehended by the other. The church and its authority are one thing: the factory and its authority another. A frontier lies between.

I crossed the frontier. It was not revolt against academic training, but the completion of that training.

I finished my course at University and New College, Edinburgh, and went to work with my hands in a paper mill in Fife. A six months' investigational period was fixed to allow me to cover the various departments and come in contact with practically all of the fifteen hundred employees while they worked. By remaining in one department for ten days or a fortnight and working steady dayshift all the time, I was able to meet two different shifts each day of one week, and then the third shift when the change round took place on the following week. On top of this full working week I took services on the Sundays in the churches in the district and wherever mill folk had their homes. My evenings were fully occupied with preparation for these, with talks I was invited to give on weeknights by Women's Guilds, W.R.I's, etc., with taking part in the social life of the community, with keeping in touch with local Y.M.C.A. and church life, and with occasional visiting. My status in the mill was that of a worker, though I made no bones about my being a minister. I asked and accepted no privilege, no special respect for my office. The work was not handpicked for me, nor was the company. My wage was the usual wage for an assistant in my church—its equivalent in industry being that of a semi-skilled labourer.

Everything went smoothly for a start. I did not broadcast the fact that I was a minister, nor did I conceal it. I was taken to be one of those persons who go round a paper mill learning the trade; and no questions were asked. Then I went off to lunch one day and came back to find everything changed. Word had got round that I was a minister. Nervousness was the order of the day. People sheered off when they saw me coming. Only a few tried to make fun of me: the general reaction was to uneasiness. Two came up to me and apologized for swearing. Some tried hard to speak proper English. There were desperate attempts to think of something religious to say in conversation. The natural relations were disturbed and the harmony upset. Panic almost mastered me. All I could do was carry on and pray for deliverance. Gradually men came to see that I wanted them to be nothing but their real selves. In a few days things were back to normal again. Thereafter the news preceded me that a minister was coming

to work with the men, and what had to be overcome was an initial awkwardness in relationships.

I had had one terrifying glimpse into the chasm which separated church and people. The disclosure of my profession had meant a rupture in relationships hostile to the free flow of life.

As ministers we go about daily shaking hands with masks. We rarely know people as they are, but only the face they put on towards us. We see them in leisure hours, their tempers curbed, under conscious restraint. Working with men in the mill here, these masks have been ripped aside. Character cannot be hid because hitches are unavoidable. Men are caught off their guard and cannot keep up a pose. I believe it is better to know men as they really are, in every mood, than to walk among waxworks figures.

There is often something very artificial in church visitation. People are on good behaviour because the minister is in, and don't quite know how to balance themselves in their chairs. There is a sigh of relief when he goes. Working in the mill gives the most natural possible entry into the homes of the people. I find that the chap who was working beside me yesterday is off with neuritis, and I call to see how he is getting on. My neighbour lays down his spanners and turns to me: "I've been telling the wife about ye, Ian," he says, "why no come up the night and hae a bite o' supper wi' us?"

It is possible for sermons to be very abstracted from life and to be given in scholarly, unmeaningful language. It is most difficult to preach sermons unrelated to life from a situation like this—the tensions are too open, the problems too plain. The Sunday sermon will not deal with the precise nature of the bodies which inhabit the seventh heaven which Paul reached in a trance when the week has been taken up with problems such as that of a workmate who arrives home early one night to find another man in bed with his wife.

Prayer becomes monotony for many a man and ceases to mean the same it once did. We all have times when we just turn the prayer-wheel. It is difficult for prayer to become that in the nakedness of life here. Prayer becomes an agonizing entreaty to God for courage to face another day of open tension and opportunity. Prayer becomes a cry for strength to face overwork, tiredness, disheartenment in a situation whose complexities are continually on the point of having one completely beaten.

It is healthy for our pride and our opinion of our esteem in the eyes of the community to be shown the mysteries of one branch of life by someone who comes to us for the explanation of other mysteries. It readjusts the balance of life and makes life a compact of learning and teaching as it ought to be. It is healthy to be reminded that, if a teacher in one field, one is a learner in others, and it puts us in a right relationship with other men. It puts an end to the legend of the minister "oracle," whose statements must not be disputed even if they are privately rejected; and leaves the way clear for the free flow of life between persons who are good at different things and who exchange their knowledge for mutual benefit.

I must emphasize one of the great discoveries here: the amazing fellowship gained through common activity. Set your hands to the

same job of work with one or two other men and women, and carry on for an hour without a word being spoken (in some sections of the mill there is no alternative because of incessant noise). As you work you find a bond uniting you to them, the bond of a common task. So when a "smoke-time" comes you talk to these other people who were unknown an hour previously, and you find them friends. The church can ignore only to its cost the immense fellowship gained by bending one's hands with others to a common task, for is not fellowship the greatest form of evangelism?

Our age is drugging thought with activism. The jitterbug is at its heart. The time when we could sit down to a talk in a house with the whole family gathered around, the time when we could get down to a subject with a man over a pipe, is gone. We have to deal with restless, flea-bitten humanity.

Men in factories to-day seem always to be on the move—from home to work, from job to job, from work to home. If their job should be such that it ties them down, it is an abuse of one's position to exploit this to pump in religious teaching—men cannot escape.

The holding of services, therefore, does not offer a good approach. I doubt whether the floating population of a factory could ever become a congregation. There are churches all around which provide the customary offices of the church. It requires a Christian background for one to take part in church services with understanding—and this job is essentially concerned with those who do not have that background.

What counts most with men is the way in which you measure up to life as you rub shoulders with them. It is in silent ways, the ways of character and of prayer, that the most effective witness is made.

Moreover, there come times—mere flashes of time—when direct religious teaching is possible. Only a few relevant words can be said, maybe half a dozen in all; but because you are on the spot and they are said just then, they are worth a dozen sermons at another time.

We must redirect the restlessness of our age. We have to transfer it from a physical jitterbug to the mental discontent which the physical movement conceals. First we must get people asking themselves disturbing questions. Only then can dogma be brought to bear.

The gospel must be given in sharp injections to people who are here one minute and gone the next. The man who cannot get something across in a ten-minute service will find it very difficult to speak to this age of ours. It is quite possible that in the future a section of the ministry will have to leave its static centres and become itinerant—like a chaplain taking services here and there among the troops on the field of battle. Here a little, there a little—that's the master-key to our ministerial approach to-day.

The first thing to do if one is unadjusted to a situation is to go plumb into the middle of the situation, set up one's dwelling there, and learn. This cannot be done from a detached viewpoint. I believe that a radical dealing with the situation in industry involves a radical approach in life and work and situation.

The essential thing is to set up a witness among men where it cannot be avoided, which men can examine and decide about for themselves. If a more open technique of propaganda is found to be necessary, I

am not satisfied that we have yet discovered it—I say that after a long experience in open-air speaking at pit heads, factory gates and so on. It may take years to discover a new technique, years of testing and trying this way and that. But I believe this must be undertaken rather than that we should lazily adopt methods not quite effective or not quite gracious enough for the ears of the folk in the factories.

A lot of hard swearing, domestic unfaithfulness, raw and coarse thinking, two-facedness, have to be expected as the order of the day. Much of this is just on the surface ; but it will hit the unprepared hard, and ought to be anticipated and willingly accepted by anyone who takes on this sort of job.

If holy hands of horror are held up at such things as swearing, the game is lost. It is easy to impose one's own background and ideas on other men as the result of the prestige of a profession, forgetting that they have a different background in which swearing finds a natural place. It is no achievement of faith to get men to hold themselves in in one's presence when they swear away merrily in one's absence. Swearing is their habit as not drinking tea out of saucers is ours. *We must first affirm what is in men before setting them right*—and not be put off with trifles which are external.

Life must be faced and dealt with over its whole area. To stand aside from sport, social items, dancing, rambles, is to admit that Christianity has not to do with the whole of life ; whereas, in fact, Christianity brings true pleasure into these things and allows us to see them in their right perspective. So, without paying attention to those who say it is dangerous, and in the name of Christ who attended the feasts even of publicans and sinners, we must fling ourselves into the proper recreations and amusements of ordinary men and women, fostering them and transfusing them with Christian vitality.

The person who can do this work must have most of the following characteristics : not easily embarrassed, and ready with a witty retort in answer to attempts to embarrass ; not easily shocked by morals and manners different from his own ; willing to work faithfully and hard ; ready to take part in ordinary conversation without forcing it into religious channels ; wakeful to opportunities for teaching ; not demanding a special respect to begin with, but willing to work for a good reputation ; prepared to be continually afraid, and yet go out to face another day, and another and another, not flinging the whole thing up when sparks begin to fly ; willing to be overwhelmed by complexities and rely only on prayer.

Now that I see things from the inside I am much more sure than ever before that the Christian gospel is able to meet man's desperate needs to-day.

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